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ABSTRACT

Petra Rodriguez, a middle-aged Spanish-speaking migrant woman without reading skills, made it clear when interviewed about reading, that she felt it to be the responsibility of literate people to teach illiterate people how to read. The researcher, as part of another project, arranged for tutoring in the woman's home and discovered that the woman's idea of reading differed from the tutor's and required adjustments in the psycholinguistic approach originally taken. Her concern was more with getting the letters right than with having meaningful reading experiences. A second and ultimately greater obstacle involved critical consciousness of one's self and situation. The problems of arranging transportation for the woman and her son's attitude about her learning to read led the investigator to understand that she and the tutor had missed important opportunities to direct the instruction to themes of importance to the student: her role, her life, her perceptions of herself. In addition, the investigator saw, after the fact, opportunities for looking at her own stereotypes of women, illiterates, or Mexican migrants, or at her attitudes and concepts of reading curriculum in this situation. (MSE)

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Petra: Learning to Read at 45

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Pat Rigg

Center for Expansion of Language and Thinking

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Petra: Learning to Read at 45

Meeting Petra

I met Petra Rodriguez almost two years ago. I was investigating the perceptions of literacy held by various groups of adults who were considered illiterate, and one of these groups was Spanish speaking migrant workers. The person helping me interview people in the migrant camp suggested that we interview Petra because he knew that she had never been to school and could not even write her name. So one hot afternoon in late September, when Petra and her husband came back from a long day spent on ladders picking apples, D. and I were waiting for them at their two rooms in the camp barracks. Petra is a big woman, a little over five and a half feet tall, large bosomed and very handsome with her strong white teeth and long black hair in a thick braid down her back. Her hands are big and callused.

D. acted as translator, since neither Petra nor her husband knew any English, and my Spanish is minimal. He asked if we could have a few moments of her time, and introduced me as la profesora de la universidad, someone interested in talking with people who did not read or write. Petra gave me a small smile and, because she knew and liked D., waved us graciously into the tiny sweatbox that served her, her husband, and her two sons as kitchen, dining room, and living room, all in one. Her husband took a towel and a

bar of soap and went off to the building which housed the communal showers and toilets. Petra apologized for still being covered with field dirt. She invited us to be seated on the bench that was pulled up to the table. I turned on the tape recorder, and D. began asking Petra questions from the Burke Interview.

The Burke Interview is a set of questions designed to elicit a person's unarticulated and unconscious theory of reading. Since all of the questions assume that the person being interviewed reads to at least some extent, these questions are often irrelevant to someone who does not read or write at all. Discovering that irrelevancy was one result of the study.

At one point in the interview, D. asked, "If you knew someone was having difficulty reading, how would you help him?" and after a long pause during which Petra had looked at him searchingly, D. asked, "Do you understand the question?" This is Petra's answer: "I miss not knowing how to read. People like you, who know how, should come to help me so I could learn some stories, at least how to write my name."

"But" D. persisted, "you, how would you help someone who doesn't know how to read?"

"As I told you," she replied. "If I were like you who know how to read, I would be very nice to that person who doesn't know how to read. You know, there are a lot of people like that, right? Someone who already knows how to read is

all the time saying, 'Why do you want to learn that?' and they don't care. They are all the time judging one because one doesn't know how to read, but one knows how to think in one's head."

I was struck by this woman's reply, by this woman herself. Of all the people we had interviewed, she was the first and she was the only one to assert her right to literacy, and to demand help. She did it pleasantly, softly, courteously, but she did it. "People like you should come to help me ... at least to write my name."

After D. had asked all the questions on the Burke Interview, I told him, "Ask Petra if she has any questions for us."

Petra turned to me. Pausing after each sentence so that her words could be translated clearly, she said, "This is what I want to know: Why are you asking these questions? Are you trying to help those who can't read, or are you asking them to help yourselves?"

True, Petra couldn't read, but she could think in her head.

Before Petra asked her searching question, while we were still going through the Burke Interview, Petra gave a shrugging laugh to many of the questions and said, "No se leer. I can't read." Finally, I interrupted the interview: in very halting Spanish I said to her, "Yes, you can read, at least something."

"No," she shrugged and laughed a short laugh, "Se nada. I don't know anything."

I waved at a can of shortening and a box of rice on the small shelf over the sink: "D., tell her she must have read those labels, or she couldn't have bought the right things." D. translated back to me, "She says she's memorized the look of the containers, but she can't read." I don't know why I was almost desperate to prove to this woman that she could read and, however little, was reading, but I was. I pulled a pad of paper in front of me and printed her name in block capital letters, saying "Petra Rodriguez" as I did so; then I wrote D.'s name and my own, saying each, and passed the paper to her. "Which one is yours?" She put her finger on PETRA RODRIGUEZ and looked at me inquiringly. Yes, I nodded, "You can read. Pues leer."

We finished our interview, turned off the tape recorder, and packed up our tapes and pencils and paper, all but the paper on which I had written the three names. And I forgot about that paper.

Two months later, after the apple picking was over for the year and the migrants had moved on to Florida, D. stopped by my place. "I saw Petra yesterday. Do you remember her? She and her husband and her two sons are staying here over the winter. Do you know what she has been doing? She kept that sheet of paper you wrote her name on, do you remember? She has been copying her name. Now she can write her name. She told me to tell you and to give you greetings."

I don't know if I can express clearly how moved I was by this, how important it was to me. By God, here was a woman who deserved whatever help I could find for her. Imagine, keeping that paper and tracing over and over, and then copying onto grocery sacks and similar papers, since there are no writing supplies in her household, the letters of her name, PETRA RODRIGUEZ. As it happened, I was just beginning to teach a class in Adult Literacy, and one of the assignments was to tutor an adult beginning reader. One of the students was from Colombia, a lovely Spanish speaking woman. I introduced them to each other, and for the next four months, Clara tutored Petra, often with me present. Clara's log, and the records I kept of our many talks with each other about Petra and of our work together with Petra form the basis of this report.

Tutoring Petra--Theoretical Bases

Clara and I share a psycholinguistic view of reading, which means that any materials and any techniques we selected for Petra had to meet the following criteria: they had to be meaningful, and they had to be complete units of discourse, so that language would neither be fragmented nor without context. We also wanted materials and techniques that were interesting to all three of us. Clara and I also share a view of what kind of teaching, what kind of learning we should strive for. That view had been expressed over a dozen years ago in Paulo Freire's (1970) essay, "The Adult Literacy Process ...."

> The adult literacy process as an act of knowing implies the existence of two interrelated concepts. One is the context of authentic dialogue between learners and educators as equally knowing subjects. This is what schools should be--the theoretical context of dialogue. The second is the real, concrete context of facts, the social reality in which men exist.

Tutoring Petra--First Session

For our first tutoring session, I drove Clara to Petra's trailer, #247, only one car width away from #246 and #248. Petra welcomed us warmly, extending her big rough hand to clasp each of ours in turn, and took us inside. An old television set was on, the images dimly discernible through the set's snow of static, the musical messages urging Petra, in a language she didn't speak, to buy products she could little afford. There was a small baby, a neighbor's son, whom Petra babysat every day, drowsing with a bottle half in his mouth, kept from rolling off the couch by two cushions. The rest of the furniture included a table and chairs for eating. No books, no magazines, no sewing materials, no embroidery or knitting--Petra spent her days in this bare space.

Clara and I arranged our coats, books, papers, tape recorder, and selves as best we could, finally settling the three of us on the sagging couch, with Petra seated between Clara and me, so Clara could tutor and I could record and take notes. After some conversation in which Clara and Petra set up their schedule of meetings, Clara gave Petra a picture to

look at and discuss. The picture, torn from an old magazine, shows a young, dark skinned woman holding a baby, both of them obviously very poor; and on the wall above the woman and baby is a photo of a healthy, blonde, middle class young woman beaming at her healthy, blonde baby. The contrast is a strong one. The dark skinned woman could be Mexican. Petra and Clara discussed the picture a bit, and then Petra dictated and Clara wrote down this interpretation:

Por Falta de Dinero

Ella se siente triste porque tiene muchos niños y porque ella no tiene trabajo. Pues no sabra leer también como yo. Pues ahora ya tiene que enseñarse ye tiene que estar diferente. Ya no tiene que estar igual como antes si ella se ensena porque ella ya va a saber leer, porque tiene que tener una maestra muy buena y ella la tiene que enseñar.

Here's an English translation:

For Lack of Money

She feels sad because she has a lot of kids, and she doesn't have a job. Well, she doesn't know how to read, just like me. Well, now she has to learn and she has to change. She is not going to be the same as before, if she learns. Because she is going to learn to read; because she is going to get a very good teacher and that teacher is going to teach her.

Tutoring Petra--Materials

We used Por Falta de Dinero as reading material for the next months, rereading it over and over again to Petra. But, of course, that was not the only material we found for her. At first, neither of us had many Spanish materials; then I made a trip to a Mexican bookstore in Chicago and Clara made a trip to Mexico City; both of us bought or begged material we could use with Petra. Clara begged a few children's readers, the primers that her host's children had used in first grade. She bought a great many magazines, including some Mexican equivalents of Ladies Home Journal, full of fashions, recipes, and advice to the middle class housewife. I bought fotonovelas, which are the very cheap paperback version of TV soaps, complete with many close-ups of anguished faces--Should Mario tell Rosa that Linda spent the night with Arturo? And I bought a slim volume of prayers for specific saints' days, a book of riddles, and some tabloids, La Alarma, the Mexican equivalent of National Enquirer.

From a friend of mine who taught Spanish, I got some poems of modern Hispanic poets. Our combined collection of Spanish materials offered Petra a wide choice of reading material; she could select any of it for intensive study with Clara or for leafing through during the 10 minutes of sustained silent reading (which I will describe later) in each tutoring session. We also continued to elicit reading material with the language experience approach. (Rigg, 1981). Petra wanted very much to communicate with a sister whom she had not seen

in over two years, so she dictated a letter which Clara took down carefully, making a carbon copy so that she would have one for Petra's rereading after the letter had been mailed.

Tutoring Petra--Techniques

Typically, after Clara and Petra had reviewed previous language experience materials and produced new ones, they turned to commercially published materials. Usually Clara read these aloud to Petra, finger pointing as she did so, and then handed the book or magazine to Petra; Petra could look at the selection, ask Clara whatever questions she had, read what parts of it she could and wanted to. We encouraged her to do this reading silently, but she often read orally, sometimes a word only that was repeated several times, sometimes a phrase or sentence. Petra picked out a recipe for Calabacitas en libro from one of Clara's Mexican women's magazines, a dish which looked really delicious in the picture accompanying the recipe. She and Clara worked over the recipe, using the procedure I've just mentioned. After some work, Petra could read the recipe, although she couldn't call off most of the words accurately; she reported the next week that she had taken the recipe home and tried it. She also said that she had a recipe of her own for calabacitas (zucchini), so she dictated that to Clara.

Petra's dictated recipe for Calabacitas de Petra made it clear that, through the processes of reading recipes and dictating a few of her own to Clara, Petra had learned the concept

of recipe. This concept includes at least two important aspects: 1) consideration of the reader as someone who does not already know how to prepare this dish; 2) knowledge of the format of recipes--ingredients listed first, with notes on measurements, then instructions on preparation. Six weeks earlier, when Petra first dictated a recipe to Clara, it had taken over 30 minutes to elicit vague directions for preparing tortillas; Petra's dictation of Calabacitas de Petra took half that time, and for a recipe many times more complicated than the tortillas.

The tutoring sessions included Clara's reading to Petra, something that Clara enjoyed and hoped Petra would too. This oral reading was often poems of modern Hispanic writers, especially Mexican and Colombian writers, and Clara also read prayers, short stories, and riddles. Petra seemed to enjoy hearing all of these, but it was the prayers and poems she wanted to read herself.

Clara's reading to Petra accomplished two things: It demonstrated to Petra the wide selection possible for her to choose from; and it demonstrated how written language sounds. The ways we talk and the ways we write use language differently, and to become literate, one needs to become accustomed to the different conventions, structures, patterns, and intentions of different kinds of written discourse. Petra knew what format a personal letter required; she had received a few letters from her sister and she indicated that she knew what conventions

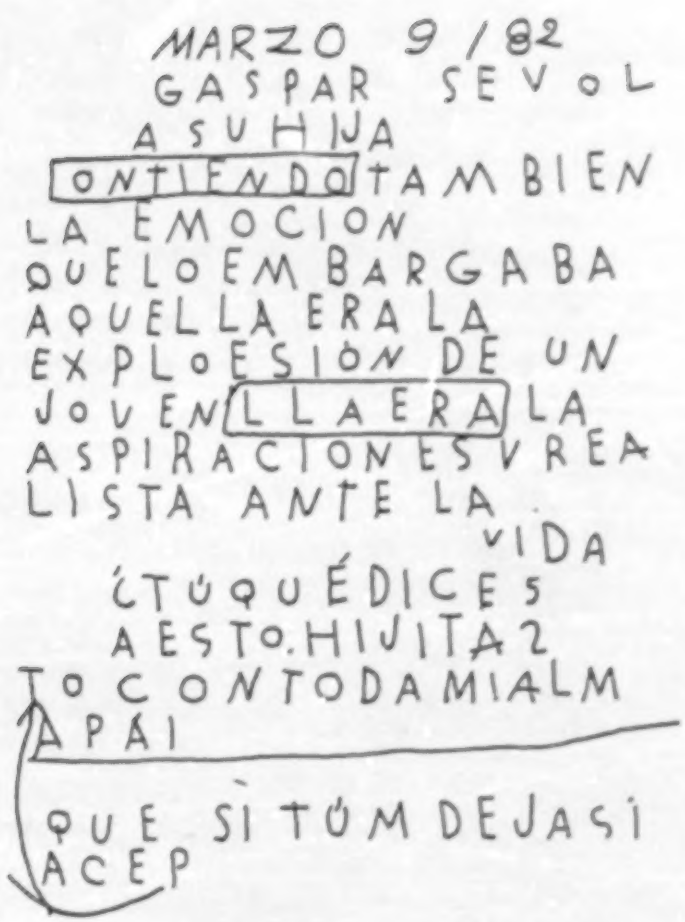
were required when she dictated a letter to her sister. By working through recipes with Clara, Petra learned what structures were required by recipes. Clara and I found some written material that was very close to structures Petra used in speech--prayers and riddles--but we wanted her also to become accustomed to the sound of literary language.

Let me recap: The tutoring sessions began with each person reporting on her accomplishments since the last session. Then we looked over materials we had produced at previous sessions, rereading many; then we produced new material using the language experience approach. Clara read aloud, and then we usually closed with 10-15 minutes of sustained silent reading. Sustained silent reading is, as the name suggests, a quiet time in which each person, teacher and student, reads something silently without interruption or questions (McCracken, 1971). I have two video tapes of Petra and Clara working together, each showing a period of sustained silent reading. In the first, Petra goes slowly, page by page, through a magazine, backwards. In the second, filmed six weeks later, Petra goes slowly through a fotonovela, forwards. When I drove her home after that second session, I asked Petra if she had understood the fotonovela. She smiled and nodded, "Yes, some."

Problems: Views of Reading

So far, this all sounds as though we had no problems, but we did. We faced two problems. The first problem was this: As I've said, Clara and I share a psycholinguistic view of

reading. But Petra doesn't. Her view of reading differs from ours considerably. We think both the purpose and the process of reading are building meaning, using visual cues from the print and non-visual cues from behind the eye (Goodman, 1975b). We think the individual words don't matter much, that the reader should build meaning of the whole (the whole letter, the whole recipe, the whole riddle), and if interested, go back later and bother with the words. If Petra was concerned with words, though, we were certainly willing to accommodate our teaching to her concern. But Petra didn't seem concerned with words. She didn't seem concerned with the meaning of the whole, either. She wanted to get the letters right. When Clara was reading Petra's simple yet eloquent description, Por Falta de Dinero, aloud to Petra, Petra interrupted: "Is that a T?" she asked, pointing. Clara stopped, "Yes," and started reading again. Petra put her hand in front of Clara's and pointed again, "Is that an M?" "Yes," and so it went throughout the whole story. We received more information on Petra's view of reading when she showed us what she had decided to do as homework.



We admired her printing, and then Clara asked her to point out or to say any of the words she had copied, but Petra couldn't. She had not been aware of copying words, only of practicing her letters. Literacy meant drawing clear letters, and drawing one's name. Here is an excerpt from Clara's journal, written about this time:

> In today's lesson ... I wrote a letter to her, pointing out her progress and interest in learning. I included the words: trabajo, maestra, and enseñar in my letter. I gave her my letter and asked her to identify three important words. She looked at it and concentrated on vowels and letters but couldn't figure out the words. So I gave her the cards (each word was written on a card) to match these words with the three important words in my letter. She couldn't do it. She just said, "Is this an A?" I chose this technique because I wanted to find out if she had grasped the idea of a word, but I realized that her concept is consonants or vowels.

A little after this, I read part of a pre-publication copy of Emilia Ferreiro's and Ana Teberosky's Los Sistemos ... (now Literacy before Schooling, 1982), and my reading about three- and four-year-olds' conceptions of literacy, especially about their frequent confusion of the terms word and letter, made me think perhaps we interpreted Petra's actions wrongly. Perhaps she did have the concept of "word", palabra, but thought when Clara asked for "tres palabras importante" that she was asking her to point out letters. I still don't know if she had the concept and just confused the label, or not. At any rate, we knew that our theories of reading differed from hers, and we had to adjust our lesson plans accordingly.

This adjustment was a continuous process, typical of the unarticulated negotiation that two adults go through when they combine their efforts to accomplish a task, with each having a different idea of how to go about it, but both being courteous.

Petra did begin to use the word palabra in the same sense as we did within the next three weeks, especially after a session in which Clara brought several food labels, kinds of food we knew were in Petra's cupboard, and asked Petra to select labels she could read (i.e., she knew what food those labels represented). Petra chose sal and tomate and Clara showed her, amongst all the print on the labels, just where SALT and TOMATO were. Then Clara wrote SAL and TOMATE on cards, one each, and asked Petra to create a sentence. "I like tomatoes. Me gustan tomates." Clara wrote the sentence on the back of the TOMATE card. The rationale for this technique is that Petra can read the sentence because she knows what it means; from the sentence she can focus more finely on a word. I don't know if it was this technique that was responsible for Petra's growing ability in the next five or six lessons to identify specific words, indicating that she now had the same concept and the same label as we.

Writing her name was still Petra's major goal, and she was happy to practice that for self-imposed homework one week, coming to our meeting the next time eager to show us that she

had written her name on the steno notebook and the folder we had given her. "Now I can write my name on everything that belongs to me," she said proudly. We continued to adjust our instruction, admiring her well-drawn letters, and including primers from Mexican first grades in the collection we offered her for reading material, and so forth. We believed it more important to maintain an Adult-Adult relationship (Vella, 1979) than to adhere rigidly to our psycholinguistic theory of reading.

Problems: II Social-Cultural Expectations

The second problem involved Freire's conscientizaçao, becoming critically conscious of one's self and one's situation. This problem proved more difficult to solve; indeed, we never did.

Petra lived five miles from Clara, and Clara had no car, nor does the town have a bus service. At first, I picked up Clara and took her to Petra's trailer, and participated in the session myself as much as my little Spanish allowed, but I wanted Clara, who was my student, to feel independent and responsible. I also wanted Petra out of that trailer where the only reading material was the labels on food cans and detergent boxes and the TV screen. But getting Petra the five miles to the school where Clara had reserved a small room in the library meant that Petra's 18-year-old son, José, had to drive her. And that, in turn, meant that when he finished

his English class, he had to drive the five miles, pick up his mother, drive her the five miles back, babysit his 10-year-old brother for an hour and a half, and, finally, drive everyone back home. José preferred to work on the family car which only he kn w how to drive or was licensed to drive, or to meet a couple of his buddies downtown. His mother was middle-aged; she was a female; most of all, she was his mother. José saw no reason for her to start reading and writing: better she stay home and make fresh tortillas for his arrival home from class.

After the third time Clara had waited an hour for José to bring Petra to the library, I learned to leave Tuesday and Thursday afternoons open, so that I could respond to Clara's frantic call: "José won't bring Petra again this afternoon; can you take me to her trailer? We have already missed one session this week!" Although Clara and I had plenty to say about José to each other, we never openly castigated him or complained about him to his mother. We were timid: we feared that José would never bring Petra if we made a fuss; we feared that Petra would acquiesce if José said that she should stay home and not attend any more tutoring sessions. We feared that she would slip back into that isolation, with no one all day every day to talk to except an infant and a TV gabbling in a foreign tongue. So we muttered to each other and dropped hints to José, to which he remained oblivious. Between ourselves, Clara and I condemned José for his selfishness, for his sexism, for his stereotyped view of what his

mother should be and do. But I did not examine my own stereotypes of women, nor of illiterates, nor of Mexican migrants. In her first language experience story, Petra had said of the woman in the picture, "She is not going to be the same as before, if she learns to read." Petra gave us the lead we should have followed. Here was the topic for discussion, the theme that should have organized our materials and our sessions. We didn't recognize this theme or use this lead to create the authentic dialog that could have increased our critical consciousness of ourselves and our situations. One of us was Petra's maestra, her teacher, a very special position; the other was una maestra de la universidad, a position deserving high respect. And we two maestras never asked Petra what changes she anticipated as a result of learning to read; we never investigated what changes in any of our households were caused by our attempts to become better educated.

Why didn't I share with Clara and Petra my memories of when, like Petra, I was "imprisoned" in a tiny trailer with squalling babies, no books, and no way to get out? We two maestras never mentioned any times in our own families when our menfolk had treated us shabbily; we two maestras never started even one discussion that might have freed all three of us to learn about ourselves and about each other.

And so that strong woman, who, still grubby from a day's hard labor picking apples, had talked about being able to

think in the head; that woman who had faced la maestra de la universidad and asked, "Are you doing this to help people who can't read and write, or are you doing this for yourself?"; that woman followed our lead, let us pick the topics for our sessions, and was thrilled when she could read TOMATE and SAL.

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